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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001285

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: BUHARI STILL STANDING

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reasons: 1.5 (B & D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Poloff met General Muhammadu Buhari, ANPP presidential candidate, to discuss his assessment of Nigeria and his future plans. Buhari commented that he had no faith in Obasanjo because the "four failed years has only emboldened him." Buhari criticized the electoral tribunals for lack of fairness and warned that Nigeria's relative quiet did not signify acquiescence, but rather it was the silence that often comes before something dramatic happens. He asserted that the ongoing arrests of opposition activists and the continued shortfalls of funding for the military would create more tension and uncertainty. While appearing tired, he did not seem frustrated. Rather, he seemed impatient, as if he was merely marking time until a political opening was presented.

ON OBASANJO

2. (C) Buhari remains critical of President Obasanjo and his government. He complained about increasing corruption and groused that the Administration's privatization efforts only transferred national assets into the hands of regime insiders. He alleged that this rising corruption and nepotistic privatization were indicative of "Obasanjo's legacy of failure." Commenting that the previous four years has only emboldened Obasanjo, Buhari pointed to the widespread irregularities of the 2003 elections and the use of security services to ensure a "mandate for continuity" as Obasanjo's only success. He said that Obasanjo's style of governance continues to alienate people throughout the country. While raising expectations that he would appoint a stellar, reformist cabinet, Obasanjo's Ministerial selections are a combination of recycled failures and nobodies, Buhari remarked. He predicted that corruption and mismanagement will continue unabated, and, if Obasanjo lasts a whole term, will culminate in elections in 2007 "even worse than 2003."

ON TRIBUNALS

3. (C) Buhari stated flatly that the tribunals were a waste, but said that he had promised to seek redress through the tribunals and would see this pledge through because "I am a man of my word." He said that he only committed to go along with the process for appearances sake. Buhari claimed the majority of cases were thrown out for "technical" reasons and said "everyone knows" the judges were bribed and coerced to maintain the status quo. When asked about his prospects, Buhari stated that he expected little from the Federal Court of Appeals (which sits as the initial Presidential Tribunal), but would follow the process through to the Supreme Court. When asked what he expected from highest court, Buhari responded, "I know (Chief Justice) Uwais and he will behave honorably."

ON SECURITY

4. (C) Buhari lamented Nigeria's continued insecurity, claiming "more people have been killed under this regime than under Abacha." He alleged the detention of thousands of political activists, saying this was a symptom of Obasanjo's intellectual and moral bankruptcy. He remained concerned that the potential for violence is great throughout Nigeria. He claimed that people throughout the country are frustrated and angry and are agitating to attack the "so-called legitimacy" of this regime. Buhari said that if Obasanjo was aware of the "lengths we are going to in ensuring calm," he would be frightened by the

potential for upheaval." "Quiet is not acquiescence; the tendency is to take the fight to the streets," he averred. Buhari was also concerned that the military is demoralized and has been woefully underfunded. As an institution, the military has been in a state of decline throughout Obasanjo's term and its members are suffering disproportionately to the rest of society, Buhari claimed.

COMMENT

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15. (C) Buhari, far from frustrated, seemed a man who is confident that he will continue to play a large role in national politics and that it will not exclusively be as an opposition figure. He continues to attract large crowds to many places he travels and enjoys the limelight. While keeping his own plans close to his chest, he did appear impatient with having to go through the electoral tribunal process which he labeled ineffective. It remains ironic that among the former coupists claiming to be born-again democrats, Buhari's claims of reform have strengthened and he is increasingly viewed by the public as the (self-proclaimed) leading political opposition figure and, most strongly in the North, a primary defender of democracy and electoral fairness.

JETER